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ABSTRACT

The "new" anti-racists of the 1980s in contemporary Britain consider racism, particularly against blacks, as both a structural and a white problem. Anti-racist activists, whose attitude is a mirror-image of the political left's general concern about the media--where blacks are in the minority--regard the media, especially television, as replicatory and contributing to the racism of society at large. Intervention by anti-racists has become a factor in the politics of British television and may involve either the "political/amateur" or "practitioner" approach. In the former, pressure groups and organizations concerned with race and/or media organize individuals acting in a personal capacity to intervene in television through audience response. Their criticism may discourage television from excess racism and/or encourage professionals within the industry to respond to a public demand for alternatives. The "practitioner" approach often involves black people in the industry, who, by their mere presence, can have considerable impact on the politics of the workplace. Also, black political culture in general can exert influence on television programs as a popular constituency. Despite opposition to organized anti-racist pressure, it is expected to continue. (CGD)

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TELEVISION AND ANTI-RACISM

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Paper presented to the
1986 International Television Studies Conference

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There is an often unquestioned assumption amongst anti-racist activists that the media, especially television, which is perceived as the most powerful, stereotypes black people; produces predominantly negative images of blacks; excludes all but a token black presence from most mainstream programming; and generally - and highly visibly - replicates and contributes to the racism of society at large.

Such an attitude towards television mirrors closely the left's general concern about television and other media. So as the left moves from outright suspicion of and hostility towards television (in the course of which they have wished to 'isolate' or 'innoculate' people against the alleged 'undesirable' effects of the medium), to a position of fascination with television, the possibility or imperative of intervention arises.

Intervention can take two main forms, and although they are far from mutually exclusive, it is useful to be able to look at them separately. They are, firstly, the 'political/amateur' interventions, and secondly the 'practitioner' approach. The political/amateur approach is one in which pressure groups and organisations wholly or partly concerned with race and/or the media organise individuals to intervene in television using the methods available generally for audience response. Such an approach has as its starting point an analysis of television which argues that the medium is institutionally racist as an industry (1) and in the bulk of its output, but that it is neither a conspiracy nor a monolith. In particular, British television, currently still highly regulated and formally committed to the public service ethic (2) is said to be open to change through pressure. As evidence of the potential effectiveness of such an approach advocates cite the success of Mrs. Whitehouse and the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association (NVLA). Such an approach

recognises that it is negative insofar as its main function is to react to what it regards as unsatisfactory rather than positive in generating new types of television practice. Nevertheless, it is argued, the continual drip of anti-racist criticism may both discourage television from its worst excesses, and may also provide support for professionals working within the industry who may welcome assistance in establishing that there is a public demand for alternatives.

The 'political/amateur' approach does not seem to be a priority for black organisations, but it is popular with general anti-racist groups. This is interesting in itself because it marks a movement away from the style of anti-racism of the 1970s (which is better seen as anti-fascism) concerned as it was with checking the electoral advances of the National Front and other far-right wing organisations. Anti-fascism stressed the broader threat posed by fascist ideologies not only to blacks, but to women, gays, and most of all to trade unionists. To some extent this was a necessary and expedient emphasis at the time, but it overlooked the distinctive features of anti-black racism in Britain today in its haste to use potent analogies from the 1930s to make its case. Thus was anti-racism subsumed by a class analysis of fascism in which contemporary manifestations of racism were scarcely addressed (although the 'problem' of prejudice was acknowledged), and black self-organisation was often viewed with suspicion as 'dividing the working class'(3). The 'new' anti-racism of the 1980s which is illustrated in this paper with reference to television, is an advance in that it grasps that racism is both a structural and a white problem.

The organisations advocating the political/amateur approach are eccentrically diverse including pressure groups and voluntary organisations of variable ~~size and degrees of financial security~~ (4).

size and degrees of financial security (4). A significant example comes from local government; for example, the (ex) Greater London Council as part of its designation of 1984 as Anti-Racist Year produced an anti-racism pack including a guide to how individuals can make complaints of racism against television and other media. Local authorities can draw upon substantial financial resources and the time and expertise of its staff in the way that other organisations simply cannot match. From the standpoint of the study of television, moreover, it is an interesting example of local government, a sector without statutory responsibility for television, choosing to intervene in the medium because of the broad definition of the interests of local citizens that a particular regime draws. It is a practical example of how television representations of black people is becoming an item on the mainstream political agenda (5).

Yet the approach remains essentially an individual enterprise, local government assistance notwithstanding, for ultimately its success depends upon enthusiastic people acting in a personal capacity. This leaves the political/amateur interventionist open to the most common criticism deployed by television professionals when defending themselves against the charges of the anti-racists. They use the argument that their critics are lay people who do not have the necessary appreciation of the processes of television production to be able to make criticisms that merit serious consideration by professionals.

The defensiveness of professionals can be understood in part because sometimes it must appear as if the media is currently besieged by a bewildering array of critics all bent on making creative freedom impossible. State complicity in the vetting of BBC staff; the pressure from the Home Secretary and others for the suppression of dissident views on Northern Ireland; Mary Whitehouse lurking in the lobbies of Westminster

Northern Ireland; Mary Whitehouse lurking in the lobbies of Westminster whenever the result of the ballot for Private Members' Bills is announced, and the establishment of the Peacock Committee must all be worrying and unwelcome. To have on top of all this groups who 'ought' to be friendly demanding change must be depressing. The extent to which many anti-racists use aggressive and simplistic hyperbole to state a case does not help. I am sure that I was not the only person who groaned in despair at the sight of a black woman on Channel Four's Comment slot assaulting the target of 'racist' television by reciting a catalogue of inaccuracies. Such examples of understandable anger rendered negative by exaggeration do not help the cause of anti-racists. There is also possibly some truth in the most common defence of professionals that television is not like academia with footnotes of qualification on every page and a methodology open to rigorous debate. It is a popular medium, a craft in which speed and instant accessibility and familiarity to the audience is apparently of the utmost importance.

Such defensiveness whilst unhelpful is understandable. Other aspects of television professionals' reaction to anti-racist criticism is more problematic. In particular there is the apparently widespread assumption that anti-racists can only have their specific criticisms taken seriously if they are, as individuals, representative of 'community' interests. Criticisms made by white viewers on a range of topics may be treated as

legitimate audience feedback, but black or anti-racist criticisms on 'race' matters are viewed differently. In part this is because the anti-racists, unlike other 'armchair' critics offer not only specific criticisms, but also a clear critique of television. Furthermore, at its crudest, many anti-racists express their criticisms as being implicitly or explicitly on behalf of black viewers. Such a proposition is not easily 'proven', especially using the sorts of evidence with which television professionals are familiar. Television comedy, for example, is a frequent target of anti-racist criticism for being a particular offender in its presentation of racial stereotypes. Yet programmes like Mind Your Language and Love Thy Neighbour have been amongst the most popular programmes with both Afro-Caribbean and especially Asian viewers (6). Such evidence might be viewed as conclusive refutation of the anti-racist case against much television comedy, and the counter-charge that all it proves is that black viewers like to see black faces on television, however portrayed, in preference to a complete absence of minorities is not easily 'proven'.

Let us now consider more fully the second category of anti-racist interventionist referred to at the start of this paper, the 'practitioner'.

Many people who work in television, especially black people, will have some degree of sympathy for anti-racist criticisms of the media. Such people may seek through their practice (or in the case of black people, may argue that by their very practice they ~~do~~ influence television in directions desired by anti-racists.

do) influence television in directions desired by anti-racists.

Sometimes such approaches have been essentially moralistic (especially when confined to the 'God Slot'), telling the audience that racial prejudice is 'bad' and that we are all brothers and sisters under the skin (7). At other times it is clear that a policy decision has been taken to 'provide a service' to ethnic minority viewers. The Asian language programmes, some educational programmes (8) and series such as Black On Black and Eastern Eye fall into this category. A more sophisticated version of this, which does perhaps demonstrate the effect that anti-racist criticism has had upon television, is the decision by Channel Four to appoint a Commissioning Editor for ethnic minority programmes who sought as policy to put programmes made by or about black people into the mainstream of the schedules. This does represent progress, but the concentration of black programme makers in the independent sector that supplies Channel Four means that black television professionals are largely trapped in the lowest paid and least secure sector of production in Britain (9).

This is a real problem for anti-racists who have an essentially 'reformist' attitude towards television output rather than, primarily, the structure of the industry as an industry. But black (and radical) practitioners, however precarious their existence, are at least in receipt of some remuneration for their work at present. There is a possibility that in future even the present level of financial security may be endangered.

The cable television 'revolution' in Britain is being hailed as presenting the possibility of 'opening up' or democratising television. Community television is seen as being a particular potential benefit for minority audiences, especially ethnic minorities. Yet the experience of ethnic minorities and local radio is not an encouraging precedent. BBC and many IBA radio stations in localities with ethnic minority concentrations often have black (often Asian language) programmes. Local radio is not noted for its big budgets, but most broadcasters are at least paid for their labour and have adequate programme budgets. Ethnic minority programmes are, it seems, often an exception. It is the rule rather than the exception that black broadcasters are not paid (and some cannot even claim expenses), and often presenters buy their own records, do all their own research, scriptwriting etc., and in effect subsidise the programmes from their own pockets (10).

Apart from questions of justice, this practice has other obvious implications. Black broadcasters tend to be those people with the time and money to support their broadcasting - in other words, the middle class. Middle-class Asians are not evenly scattered through the various sub-continental ethnic groups and so some groups are likely to be better placed to dominate broadcasting than others. The money and power in ethnic minority groups, especially Asians, is also a factor in sustaining the 'community leaders' with whom white authority habitually consults on black needs. Such leaders are not necessarily accurate in their prioritisation and articulation of issues on behalf of 'their' communities, especially women and the young. This, of course, ~~carries over into the approach to 'community' (i.e. political,~~

carries over into the approach to 'community' (i.e. political, social, economic, cultural) issues in ethnic minority broadcasts. Furthermore, there is a severely practical objection to the current situation in that standards of broadcasting, especially in minority languages, are not adequately monitored by radio stations, and, indeed, there seems to be an attitude towards ethnic minority broadcasting that as long as the formal commitment to provide a service is maintained, the quality of that service is worth little consideration (11).

There is little reason to suppose that cable television will not follow local radio in its approach to black need. In Preston in Lancashire the successful group bidding for the local cable franchise have promised to provide ethnic minority programmes, but the group's close personal associations with the local IBA radio station Red Rose and the vagueness of their proposals does not inspire confidence.

CONCLUSION

Anti-racism is ^aclear political current in contemporary Britain. It is distinguished from expressions of abhorrence of racial prejudice which are now a ritual part of mainstream British politics, by the fact that it is a left critique encompassing the history of colonialism and imperialism and the social, political and economic conditions that have developed out of that history. It follows that if racism is a structural problem intrinsic to the institutions of society as well as manifested in the attitudes of individuals, then the strategy adopted by

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anti-racists in any particular sphere is defined by short-term
and long-term objectives. The long term objective, obviously,
is the transformation of society so that race does not in any way
constitute a social division. The short term objectives
(constantly under review) relate to piecemeal reform.

Like any radical critique, therefore, the anti-racist critique
sees no fundamental alteration in the balance of power and
resources in television as possible except in the context of a
wider societal change. The smaller demands of the anti-racists
may, however, achieve some currency in the television industry
for two main reasons. Firstly, there are black people in the
industry and when such workers articulate the anti-racist case
from within the impact may be different in quality from, for
example, the left-trade unionist critique of television, for
black people are personally defined in this society by their
pigmentation in a way that can find no analogy in trade unionism.
Put simply, the mere presence of black workers can have a
considerable impact upon the politics of the workplace. Secondly,
black political culture generally, arising out of black experience,
gives the anti-racist argument on television a popular constituency
that the left in general may envy but does not possess (12).
Furthermore, the small changes that are made in television -
a black newsreader here, a black sitcom there - make a real impact
on popular, especially black, perceptions of the medium.

Intervention by anti-racists has become a factor in the politics
of television in Britain. This development has not taken place
~~in isolation, but is rather part of a general pattern of black~~

in isolation, but is rather a part of the general pattern of black and radical politics in Britain. Consequently, despite the lack of understanding, suspicion and sometimes hostility that may greet the emergence of organised anti-racist pressure in relation to television, it is not going to go away!